



Testimony of Back Country Horsemen of America
on H.R. 1349
Presented to the
Federal Lands Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee
December 6, 2017

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Colleen Hanabusa and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA) and our 13,000 members, I thank the committee for the opportunity to comment on H.R. 1349. BCHA strongly opposes H.R. 1349 and we encourage members of the subcommittee to oppose this legislation. H.R. 1349, titled “To amend the Wilderness Act to ensure that the use of bicycles...is not prohibited in Wilderness Areas...” represents an attack on the cultural heritage perpetuated by Backcountry Horsemen and would create significant dangers for persons using horses and pack stock within congressionally-designated wilderness areas.

If enacted, HR 1349 would serve to undermine the 1964 Wilderness Act, which has been used by Congress for over half a century to protect unparalleled landscapes and the primitive and unconfined recreational experience enjoyed by horsemen and women. Our members continue to be alarmed at the rapid diminishment of these recreational opportunities on landscapes throughout the nation. With less than 3% of the land in the continental United States designated as wilderness, there are plenty of lands— including public lands—that remain open to mountain bicycles outside wilderness. Consequently, we view HR 1349 as a significant threat to the public’s long-standing use and enjoyment of federal public lands and, specifically, the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Founded in 1973, BCHA is a national non-profit organization. We are a service organization, with our volunteers acting to keep trails open for everyone. Our mission includes a desire to perpetuate the common sense use and enjoyment of horses in America's back country and Wilderness. We currently operate in 32 states and our membership includes nearly 190 chapters with over 13,000 dues-paying members.

In 2016 alone, BCHA volunteers documented an in-kind contribution of labor and expenses in excess of \$13.3 million for various service projects and trail maintenance activities on public lands throughout the nation, with a large portion of that occurring in Wilderness areas. BCHA and its partners assist land management agencies and non-profit organizations in the

maintenance of trails on public lands that are enjoyed by hikers, hunters, anglers and mountain bikers alike.

H.R. 1349 attempts to portray wheelchair access as a primary reason for amending the Wilderness Act. However, Section 507 of the Americans with Disabilities Act already makes clear that wheelchairs are permitted in wilderness. We also view H.R. 1349 to be unnecessary because the Wilderness Act has always allowed land managers to use mechanized and wheeled tools in those cases where doing so would be consistent with the agencies' mandate to preserve wilderness character.

As a national organization that engages in partnership with other trail-oriented organizations, we know there are plenty of non-Wilderness federal lands that are open to mountain biking and where additional mountain bike trails and opportunities can be created. For example, the U.S. Forest Service has stated that 98 percent of all the trails on land it manages outside of wilderness are open to bicycles. It and other agencies continue to open new mountain biking trails across the country on a regular basis, sometimes with the active support and on-the-ground assistance of BCHA volunteers.

While everyone is welcome in wilderness, wilderness is intended to represent a special type of experience, one according to the Act that "retain[s] its primeval character." People who visit the wilderness tend to do so to pursue a more primitive experience in rugged or wild surroundings. Fast-moving mountain bikes would be disruptive to such an experience and have been documented to represent a safety issue for hikers and horseback riders sharing the same trails.

Places like Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness, the John Muir and Ansel Adams wilderness areas of the Sierra Nevadas, and the Shenandoah Wilderness along the Appalachian Trail have been enjoyed by hikers and equestrians for generations. These experiences would be indelibly altered by the introduction of mechanized forms of travel along foot trails that have been free of mechanical forms of travel for hundreds of years. Bike use in Wilderness would be particularly problematic in our view because:

- Wilderness trails were not designed for mountain bikes, which are capable of rapid speeds. Combined with their often silent approach, bikes would create significant safety hazards for horsemen especially on steep, narrow or winding trails.
- Bikes in Wilderness would represent a serious safety hazard for persons on horseback or leading a pack string, when a bike startling the least-trained horse or mule among the pack string could bolt and/or endanger the entire party.
- The Wilderness Act's promise of solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreational experience would be lost if horsemen were forced to constantly scan the trail ahead and over their shoulder for rapidly approaching bikes.

There exist better, more publicly-supported, legislative approaches to enhancing mountain biking opportunities on federal public lands. Across the country, wilderness advocates and

mountain bike organizations have worked together to develop legislative proposals that preserve access to important mountain bike trails and protect adjacent areas as wilderness. Efforts like the Hermosa Creek Watershed Protection Act in Colorado and the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act in Montana have been widely celebrated and serve as models for building successful partnerships between stakeholders and land managers. These efforts have secured the support of wilderness advocates and mountain bikers. This collaborative approach is the best way to address public land management issues.

In conclusion, authorizing mountain bikes in Wilderness would forever alter a key aspect of what Congress intended to be the wilderness experience—the relatively slow, contemplative mode of travel that can be provided on foot, on horseback or via canoe. H.R. 1349 would undermine the wilderness experience, as intended by Congress when it passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. We strongly urge members of the subcommittee not to support this proposal as H.R. 1349 represents a significant and unprecedented danger to the safety and traditional use of horses and pack stock in wilderness.

Thank you for allowing this testimony.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Freddy Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Barbara (Freddy) Dunn, Chairman